

Groundwork

Conversations on Disaster Recovery



American Society of
Landscape Architects



Great Plains / Midwest

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The third session of ASLA's *Groundwork: Conversations on Disaster Recovery* series focused on the Midwest and Great Plains. This regional forum brought together landscape architects, planners, and community leaders to share experiences from one of the most hazard-prone and dynamic parts of the country—where floods, tornadoes, derechos, hailstorms, and other disasters test the resilience of both natural and human systems.

ASLA President Kona Gray, FASLA, PLA, opened the session by emphasizing the vital role landscape architects play in recovery. “Landscape architects are on the frontlines of rebuilding not just infrastructure, but trust and belonging. Recovery is about more than repairing damage. It’s about restoring hope, connections, and identity.”

Clearing the Debris

Recovery starts with understanding the scale of the damage—not just to buildings and infrastructure, but to ecosystems, cultural landmarks, and social networks. In the Midwest and Great Plains, disasters often strike suddenly and leave behind complex, widespread destruction. Panelists shared how landscape architects work alongside communities in these first critical moments to assess damage and support immediate needs while keeping long-term resilience in mind.

Landscape architect Lisa Du Russel, reflecting on Detroit’s 2021 extreme rainfall, vividly described the moment she sensed recovery. “When you hear the pumps turn back on... and people come out of their homes, helping each other... talking to each other from their porches,” she said. That tangible shift from flood to fellowship catalyzed efforts to convert houses into resilience hubs—spaces designed by communities to serve and educate long-term.



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In Oklahoma City, landscape architect Brent Wall praised municipal readiness, “Once you get things cleared away... they will basically come and take it away,” noting, however, that insurance challenges persist as hail the size of grapefruit creates hurdles in coverage and recovery planning.

Key Takeaways

- Emotional turning points matter. Visible signs like pump reactivation and neighbors re-engaging mark the shift from crisis to recovery.
- Community-driven solutions are important, too. Resilience hubs and volunteer networks are spurring durable, grassroots preparedness.
- Policy and funding early is essential. Rapid municipal action on debris clearance is vital, while insurance challenges linger.

Rebuilding with Purpose

Reconstruction after a disaster offers an opportunity to do more than replace what was lost. Speakers explored how landscape architects can guide communities to rebuild smarter—integrating green infrastructure, honoring cultural heritage, and addressing social inequities that disasters often expose or worsen. In this region, recovery projects increasingly balance economic needs, ecological health, and community well-being.

From Fort Wayne, Stacy Haviland explained the paradox of flood defenses: levees protect but also limit riverfront development, with strict maintenance rules enforcing lawn interiors over resilient plantings. In Minneapolis–Saint Paul, Joni Giese detailed a collaborative, farmer-led watershed strategy where incentives helped reduce runoff: “we funnel money” through trusted local agencies to create upstream storage (Joni Giese). Meanwhile, in Fargo, Dominic Fisher recounted a rapid push for the Red River diversion post-flood, noting how urgent timelines sidestepped design alternatives—but opened pathways for university-led partnerships and training of emergency managers. Alan Shearer emphasized treating nature-based solutions not as buzzwords but strategic entry points, especially for engagement with the insurance sector.

Key Takeaways

- Infrastructure can operate as both an opportunity and a constraint. Levees and dams shape what gets built—and how.
- Inclusive planning drives real change. Engaging farmers and community groups creates stewardship and shared investment.
- Designers and emergency planners belong together. Integrated approaches can offset rushed decisions and expand capacity.

Looking Ahead

Disaster recovery isn't just about responding to the last event—it's about preparing for what's next. Panelists discussed strategies for embedding resilience in everyday planning, from regional-scale hazard mitigation to small-scale community partnerships. They reflected on how landscape architects can help shape systems that are adaptable, inclusive, and ready to face future challenges in a changing climate.

Lisa DuRussel described a shift in her practice from technical intervention to relationship-centered design: “start by listening, not designing” (Lisa DuRussel). Ohio's Charles Frederick emphasized the increasing importance of rain gardens and green infrastructure as natural systems confront freeze-thaw cycles and combined-sewer overflows. Denise Hurt reflected on Cedar Rapids' post-derecho recovery, noting strategic tree selections: “some oaks... produced seeds... stock our nursery”—a testament to genetic and ecological resilience. Education is evolving, too—Dominic Fisher highlighted the use of serious games and UN resources to train emerging professionals, while Alan Shearer urged a greater focus on social and psychological resilience, beyond technical fixes.

Key Takeaways

- Co-creation is preferred over consultation. Place-based dialogue and collaborative listening are core to resilient design.
- The social dimension is critical. Resilience must nurture community identity, not just safeguard infrastructure.
- Cultivating systemic tools makes the difference. From game-based simulations to academic curricula, preparing future professionals is key.

Reflecting on Conversation

This forum highlighted that disaster recovery is not a single moment; it's a sustained process. From emotional cues to resilience hubs, every phase demands both technical acumen and social empathy. Whether restoring trees, negotiating natural corridors, or mobilizing community governance, landscape architects are uniquely positioned to lead holistic recovery—by amplifying local voices, aligning ecological systems, and designing for social well-being.

Universal Takeaways

- Recovery starts with emotion and community rebuilding, not just physical debris removal.
- Infrastructure restoration should be a catalyst for long-lasting resilience, not a return to status quo.
- Moving forward means valuing relationships, listening deeply, and designing with people—not merely for them.

Recordings Coming Soon + Join the Next Groundwork Forums

Continuing regional discussions will continue to explore disaster recovery across the U.S. landscape. Get all the resources and details on the Groundwork page at <https://www.asla.org/ContentDetail.aspx?id=66753>.

